

Police substation opens

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WATSONVILLE — Manuel Nava is eager to have a police satellite station move in next door to his Seneca Court apartment.

Nava, a father of three, hopes the "cholos" or gang members who he says live in the Pennsylvania Drive neighborhood will be deterred by more police in the area.

A few doors down, 18-year-old Seneca Court resident Eric Echevarria says he thinks the new police presence is "kind of a drag — it's invading our privacy."

Watsonville police officers say they hope they can make friends with both. Today, police are staging a grand opening of their second substation in the city to further community-policing efforts aimed at preventing crime, instead of merely reacting to it.

The first station opened nearly three years ago on Aspen Way when a group of business owners agreed to pool their money to rent the building. One of the merchants, Bud Allen, complained of suffering \$50,000 in graffiti damage to his building. Since police moved a satellite office nearby, he's had no further problems, said police Lt. Mickey Aluffi.

The new satellite office will be funded mostly by the Santa Cruz County Housing Authority, which built and manages the 24-unit Seneca Court complex.

"I'm hoping this will be a model to use with the other police departments," said Housing Authority Di-

Satellite office brings cops to Watsonville neighborhood

rector Mary James.

James said the substation idea came up because of problems in the surrounding neighborhood, not in the subsidized complex. Echevarria attested to the complex's strict management that doesn't allow him and his friends to "just hang out."

Another Housing Authority program places police officers in other housing projects, such as Casa Pajaro or Arista Place in Watsonville, in hopes of giving children role models. James said she's turned to these positive approaches as her colleagues on the East Coast are hiring their own police forces to patrol federal housing complexes.

The sign out front, "Watsonville Police and Parks and Recreation Services Community Office," refers to the new Ramsey Park Youth Center office that also will be located inside the substation.

Hopefully, said Aluffi, the office will encourage residents along Pennsylvania Drive to make a connection with the nearby park, across the busy Main Street thoroughfare.

"It's densely populated and there's not a lot of things to do," Aluffi said of the area.

For the next two years, substation operations mostly will be funded by a \$50,000 federal grant awarded to the Housing Authority. The Housing Authority says

it's the first time it's offered a two-bedroom apartment as a police substation, and is donating some \$10,000 a year in lost rent and staff time. Both the Housing Authority and police department have pledged to seek additional grants or other funding to keep the satellite office open.

Most of the grant will pay for additional time officers will spend at the substation, stopping by to use the phone, write reports and meet the public. However, there will be no set hours, Aluffi said.

"By not having scheduled hours, it puts people on guard ... and they won't know when we're going to be there," Aluffi said.

But that sounds suspicious to Echevarria, who thinks the outpost is just another way for police to "harass" him and his friends when they're hanging out. Because he lives in an area frequented by gang members from nearby Clifford Drive, Echevarria says he's been stopped by police. Recently, Echevarria said he was walking home from a friend's house at 11 p.m. when he was stopped and searched by an officer who said he was a suspect in a car theft.

"I was wearing baggy clothes and out late and I guess he thought I was up to something," Echevarria said.

Aluffi said youths wearing gang-type clothing at night and hanging around with friends will still get stopped, especially because of the high number of fights, graffiti and vandalism in that area.

But, he added, "It's important we recognize them as individuals and they recognize us as individuals."